DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 214 UD 032 625

AUTHOR	Comas, Jordi, R.; Milner, Murray, Jr.
TITLE	From Hierarchy to Pluralism in American High Schools: Changing Patterns in Status Distinctions and Racial Segregation.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	22p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Diversity (Student); *Group Membership; *High School Students; High Schools; *Life Style; Racial Differences; *Social Status; Social Structure; *Student Attitudes; Urban Schools; Urban Youth
IDENTIFIERS	*Pluralism; Ranking

ABSTRACT

Previous research on high school status consistently found a status structure characterized by extensive ranking and group salience. This case study, using observations and interviews, documents the emergence of a new pattern: status pluralism. The study was conducted in a medium-sized urban high school of about 1,000 students, who were nearly equally black and white. Information from this school was supplemented with information about the status structures of 191 other high schools. The two types of status pluralism, racial status pluralism and lifestyle pluralism, have varying levels of ranking and salience. Racial pluralism is the absence of ranking due to varying levels of racially based group identity. Lifestyle pluralism is an absence of ranking and an emphasis on salience resulting in a multiplicity of groups with clearly demarcated boundaries. Racial and lifestyle pluralism emerge in the differential use of space, the creation of social categories based on status identity, and the telescoping of status groups when viewed by actors across racially structured social space. The existence of "deviant" groups within the two types of pluralism cuts across rigid boundaries between the two. This analysis addresses the effects of pluralism on minimizing racial conflict and social competition. Status pluralism tends to minimize conflict because a system that is composed of segregated but roughly equal segments means that actors of different races are not, for the most part, in competition for status through association or limited access to valued resources. But the peace is a fragile one. The irony is that greater levels of racial integration may--at least in the short run--increase cross-race competition and conflict and decrease pluralism. (Contains 17 references.) (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 425 214

From Hierarchy to Pluralism in American High Schools: Changing Patterns in Status Distinctions and Racial Segregation

by

Jordi R. Comas
University of Virginia
jrc3j@virginia.edu
(804) 924-6529/970-5150
1960 Lewis Mountain Rd. #1, Charlottesville, VA 22903

Murray Milner, Jr.
University of Virginia
mm5k@virginia.edu
(804) 924-6520/296-0578
Cabell 539, U.Va, Charlottesville, VA 22903

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Jordi Comas
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

UD032625

Abstract

From Hierarchy to Pluralism in American High Schools: Changing Patterns in Status Distinctions and Racial Segregation

Previous research on high school status consistently found a status structure characterized by extensive ranking and group salience. In this case study, using observations and interviews, we document the emergence of a new pattern: status pluralism. We discuss two types of status pluralism, racial pluralism and life-style pluralism. The two types of pluralism have varying levels of ranking and salience. Racial pluralism is absence of ranking due to varying levels of racially based group identity. Life-style pluralism is an absence of ranking and an emphasis on salience resulting in a multiplicity of groups with clearly demarcated boundaries. Racial and life-style pluralism emerge in the differential use of space, the creation of social categories based on status identity, and the telescoping of status groups when viewed by actors across racially structured social space. The existence of "deviant" groups within the two types of pluralism cuts across rigid boundaries between the two. Our analysis addresses the effects of pluralism on minimizing racial conflict and social competition. Status pluralism tends to minimize conflict because a system that is composed of segregated but roughly equal segments means that actors of different races are not for the most part in competition for status through association or limited access to valued resources. But the peace is a fragile one. The irony is that greater levels of racial integration may--at least in the short-run--increase cross-race competition and conflict and decrease pluralism.

Introduction

Throughout the post-war period, most high schools discussed in sociological literature--especially public high schools-- exhibited a status stratification characterized by high levels of ranking and high salience of social boundaries. That is, with respect to ranking or hierarchy, there was usually one dominant status group, its boundaries were clearly marked, and all other status groups existed as derivatives or oppositions to the dominant group; with this single dominant group atop a ranked and salient hierarchy, these high schools can be imagined as "pyramidal." With respect to boundary salience, the members of higher ranked groups usually excluded other members and rejected the attempts of those of lower status to join or associate with their group. Moreover, before busing and magnet schools, most high schools tended to be predominantly of one ethnic/racial group due to patterns of residential segregation.[1]

Our case study represents a significant departure from both characteristics. Rather than a pyramidal structure, Woodrow Wilson High School (a fictitious name) has a plurality of status groups, none of which is clearly dominant. Moreover, the student body is almost evenly divided between blacks and whites. To understand the status pluralism most comprehensively, two distinct types of pluralism will be discussed: life-style pluralism and racial pluralism. Life-style pluralism is a melange of relatively unranked groups that have distinctive life-styles and mostly identifiable social boundaries. Racial pluralism is the cleavage of social space according to varying levels of group solidarity and affinity; in this case, it leads to a bifurcated status structures which have minimal competition.

This paper will explore the appearance of these distinct types of pluralism. To explain the observed patterns it will draw on Milner's (1994) theory of status relationships. We will first review the previous literature and the pyramidal status structure described in those findings. Then we will review the characteristics and evidence of the different forms of pluralism and how pluralism influences levels of social conflict.

Relevant Literature

---

[1]The exception were small multi-ethnic towns with one high school.

A broad and historically extensive range of topics permeates research on adolescence. Common themes or problems often include the relationship between youth culture and adult institutions (Coleman 1963, Hollingshead 1975), the origins of adolescence in family or childhood (Dornbusch 1989), and cataloguing variations among youth subcultures (Canaan 1987, Eckert 1989, Eder et al 1995, Giordano 1995, Merten 1997, Milner 1996). Whatever the particular foci of the research on high schools, researchers almost universally report a status structure characterized by hierarchy and boundary salience.

In his earliest works, Hollingshead investigated the small Midwestern town of Elmstown in 1949 in an attempt to decide how "character" develops among adolescents (1975, 5). Hollingshead's work helped parse out the adolescent social world from a seamless transition from childhood to adulthood. Still, Hollingshead believed youth culture is dominated by the adult society, and therefore, by the adult world's concerns. High school is the primary institution of this ill-defined youth culture: "The high school is the principal institution the culture has developed for this purpose, and it is so integrated with the class system that it functions more as a device to prolong dependency on the family . . . than as a training ground for adult life for all adolescents" (1975, 108). Hollingshead concludes that the class structure of the town itself, a socio-economic formation with clearly delineated cultural characteristics for each of five classes, was responsible for the status differences of the adolescents. Status here is a matter of recognized achievement that transmutes over time into reputation, the self-acknowledged goal of Elmstown's youth.

The pyramidal status structure is most evident when Hollingshead describes the "reputational groups" within the high school: the elite, the good kids, and the grubby gang. These reputational groups are a rigid hierarchy and they are visible by appearance and language differences; therefore they are ranked and salient. Furthermore, the reputational groups correspond to and are regulated by the dominant norms of the adult class structure, underscoring the ranking and salience of the status structure (1975, 162-165).

Coleman, in his seminal work, The Adolescent Society, was, in part, refuting Hollingshead's claims of the dominance of the adult class structure over the youth culture. Still, Coleman reports a remarkable consistency in the concern with popularity among the ten

structurally heterogeneous schools he studied. The students universally sought access to elite groups, and popularity was the key to access. "Only a minority can be members of the leading crowd . . . Popularity, however is something anyone can aspire to. Anyone can be popular if he exhibits the right qualities, and the "right qualities" are determined by the [youth driven] culture" (1963, 43). In most of the schools Coleman studied, popularity is determined by athletic and scholastic achievement for boys and scholastic achievement and attractiveness for girls. This pervasive and singular norm of popularity is the backbone of a pyramidal status structure. Even where there is variation between schools among students' notions of reputation and popularity, in each school, the dominant group's norms are the benchmarks against which other status groups are evaluated (1963, 197-205).

The pyramidal status structure recurs in more recent literature. While studying high school cliques in the early 1980s, Canaan found a three-tiered status structure defined by degrees of "coolness" (appearance and demeanor) with the top tier having the most coolness (1987, 387). Similar to Coleman's findings, Canaan found that girls were more dependent on association with high status boys to achieve their own high status (1987, 389). The tiers are regulated by common norms, and the result is that "although most groups believe they act independently of the top group, their social action affirms or negates top group values and is thus guided by those values" (1987, 396). This orientation to common norms is characteristic of a pyramidal status structure.

In her study of suburban Detroit high schools, Eckert focused on the social categories of jocks and burn-outs. These are highly salient categories that oppose each other in terms of visible markers and ideologies. In fact, they are so salient that intermediate groups will define themselves as proportions of "jock" or "burn-out." She claims this hierarchy of groups is "a function of competition among adolescents for control over definitions, norms, and values of their life-stage cohort" (1989, 5). For a cohort of students, this common arena of competition, combined with the large size of public schools tends toward "a rigid category system [that] is a useful strategy for dealing with large numbers and a large variety of individuals . . . Indeed the social category system serves an important purpose in the transition [and] in organizing the population's mutual conceptions" (1989, 94). Therefore, in Eckert's account, the prevalent pyramidal structure reappears.

The term status group we employ borrows from Eckert's concept of a social category. Like the social category, the status group is a discrete entity within the parameters of the social world the actors find themselves in. The status group is more than a collection of friends and it is more profound than a derogatory or descriptive label. Eckert describes how these categories develop over time:

> The evolution of categories involves the development of ideology around the behavior of individuals and groups; the expansion and consolidation of these groups into categories on the basis of shared ideology; and the elaboration of opposed ideologies through association with an increasing variety of membership (1989, 75)

The creation and maintenance of various groups helps to solidify the ideological, expressive, and behavioral boundaries of the various status groups. In the pyramidal structure, the process of group formation and solidification through opposition happens vertically and tends to rest on binary oppositions which form a continuum on which each group locates itself. In status pluralism, the absence of a singularly dominant binary opposition enables more prolific group formation and identification.

Foley (1990) studied a small South Texas town that had a significant number of students whose families were of Mexican origin. Clearly his case contains some of the elements of ethnic/racial pluralism that we will describe, but it is also clear that in his school football players and attractive girls were at the top of a basically hierarchical status structure. His seems to be a case where there plualism was beginning to emerge, but the traditional structure of hierarchy was still dominant.

The potential for a pluralist status structure, beyond the erosion of rigid categories during the senior year, is suggested in Kinney's account of "nerds." As Kinney's nerds moved from a highly rigid and hierarchical middle school, they observed the emergence of multiple groups. He writes, "Many students commented on the diversity of high school, noting the existence of groups like headbangers and punk rockers . . . ," and he goes on to write, "In addition to the headbangers and punk rockers, the students described other groups, labeled 'hippies,' 'skateboarders,' and the 'grit-headbangers,' who represented the diversification of the social structure and the development of alternative peer cultures" (1993, 29 and 29n).

Despite these multiple social categories, Kinney fails to assess whether or not these different categories are fully developed as status groups. Kinney's depiction of greater diversity in high school alludes to the possibility of a more pluralistic status structure, but lacks enough information about the activities of these groups to determine their salience and relationship to each other. Finally, he describes how nerds, through involvement in school activities, become more "normal," a process that suggests common norms of a pyramidal structure (1993, 36).

From this review, we see the key issues relevant to this study: the importance of rank and salience in characterizing high school status groups and the prevalence of the pyramidal status structure in most literature. In addition, status for girls was often much more dependent on association, especially sexual or romantic association, than it was for boys.[2] The prevalence of the pyramidal structure predicts high school status structures characterized by rigid hierarchy and contested boundary salience. In contrast to this picture we will present a case in which hierarchy has dramatically declined and in which there are high levels of racial segregation, but very low levels of conflict and significant levels of mutual respect.

The Data and the Methodology

Woodrow Wilson High School (WWHS) is a medium-sized high school of approximately 1,200 students in four grades. It is about equally Black and White with a few students of other ethnicities. The school is a comprehensive public high school, meaning that it offers accelerated academics, general academics, and special education; the school has a wide range of activities, an unusually strong fine arts program, and multiple sports including football, volleyball, basketball, softball, wrestling, soccer, lacrosse, and swimming. WWHS is the only high school for a medium-sized city of 40,000 located in a metropolitan area of about three times that size. WWHS is very diverse racially and socio-economically.

This paper uses data collected for a larger project investigating status in American high schools. The researchers include the authors, two additional graduate students, and thirty-one undergraduate students. The researchers observed lunch periods at the high school

---

[2]See Merten 1997 for an interesting example of this issue in a contemporary situation.

for two semesters, conducted interviews with students, teachers, and administrators; researchers also observed extra-curricular activities. Researchers were randomly assigned to a lunchroom and table to begin observations. They often selected a second group, or initial contacts led them to secondary observation groups. Field notes were collected in narrative format, and interviews followed a common schedule. The schedule was semi-structured and included questions about status groups, patterns of money use, conflict in the school, and dating patterns. Those interviewed were not a random sample, but were fairly representative by race, gender, and grade, with the exception of seniors who were allowed off-campus during lunch periods (and took advantage of this privilege in large numbers). Using the lunch period as the primary observation period had one key advantage. All students at the school (with exception of absent seniors) ate at the same time, for sixty minutes. This extended and singular lunch period, combined with the prevalence of dining partners in status associations, made the lunch period ideal for observing the status dynamics of the whole school, unobstructed by arbitrary divisions of grade or classes.

We dealt with typical logistical difficulties, especially obtaining parental permission for interviewees. There are two key problems which should be addressed. The first issue is the lack of seniors in the observation periods and interviews. However, the particulars of the situation make this lack less pressing. Specifically, seniors are typically the least concerned about status distinctions because of both their widely acknowledge superior status, and their are awareness of their impending graduation. Moreover, their consistent absence made them difficult to observe, but it also made their presence less of a real factor in the status structures of the school. The second issue relates to researcher bias due to previous experience; namely, the majority of the researchers felt more comfortable with White, upper-middle class students. This issue was mitigated by random group selection, as well as by a number of Black researchers most of whom clearly established high degrees of rapport with Black students in the high school.

In addition to our data from Woodrow Wilson High School we have detailed descriptions of the status structures of 191 other high schools. While it is clear that WWHS has an unusually high level of pluralism, it is also clear that the general trend in many high

schools--especially larger schools--is in this direction.

Racial Pluralism

At WWHS there are two large lunch rooms each with an adjoining courtyard. One area is known as area No. 1 and the other is labeled No. 2. When one enters these areas at lunch time it is obvious that most tables are segregated by race. Moreover, it is also obvious that lunchroom/courtyard No. 1 is predominantly white, while No. 2 is predominantly black. But predominantly does not mean exclusively. There are a significant number of black tables in No. 1 and white tables in No. 2. Moreover, perhaps 10 percent of the tables have a mixture of black and white students. In nearly all aspects of school life where spatial arrangements are voluntary--most classes, hallways, parking lots, football bleachers, etc.--this same pattern emerges. That is to say, there are very high levels of apparently voluntary segregation by race, but also significant deviations from this pattern. Neither the dominant pattern of segregation, nor the deviations from this seem to be of much concern to anyone. There are taken as a matter of course.

Moreover, there are seldom public conflicts along racial lines. Fights occur from time to time, but more often than not they are between individuals of the same race. As one walks down the halls there is not an atmosphere of tension or hostility, though some are boisterous and less considerate and polite than others. While incidents do occur, for the most part, WWHS is a safe place. But it is also clear that there are two relatively distinct racially based cultures here. Occasionally some students will say that there are really two schools within the same building, but this overstates the matter. For the bulk, each racial group seems to take the other for granted but as largely irrelevant to their personal social lives. The differences in the manner in which White and Black status group associate with the physical space of the school illustrates the semi-autonomous social arenas of racial pluralism. In short, there clearly seems to be a form of racial pluralism operating which is characterized by both considerable voluntary segregation and a lack of inter-racial conflict.

In the fall of 1997, students interviewed were asked to agree or disagree that WWHS had high levels of segregation and low levels of racial conflict. With a few qualifications,

almost unanimously students agreed with this statement. Typical responses included: "There is not much I-hate-those-Mexican-people here" (Black respondent); "People get with groups who are similar to themselves. They don't have a problem with other groups" (White respondent); "There is no racial conflict, everyone gets along...the cafeterias are more segregated, but it has always been like that" (Black respondent). Observers noted few comments or incidents of racial conflict. In addition, there was little competition for tables, hallways, spaces near soda machines, or other spaces which would be highly prized. This lack of competition, hostility, and conflict is indicative of individuals who are social actors within independent realms of social norms and perceptions.

Further evidence of racial pluralism is the social distance between Whites and Blacks as evident in their perceptions of each other. Whites and Blacks often refer to some of the same status groups; however, they often note greater differentiation within their own racial category and less differentiation in the other race. White students identify between three and seven White status groups. When commenting on Black status groups they sometimes identify only one, buy typically draw a distinction between regular black students and a subcategory variously labeled as "thugs,""gansters," or "hoodlums." Meanwhile, Black students also tend to draw a distinction between these two categories, but in addition they often draw a distinction between "real thugs" and "look a like" or "imitators"--those who try to act "hard" but for the most part conform to school norms. Blacks commenting on White status groups often identify two or three. For example, one White male student (unknown grade) listed four distinct white status groups and a Black group. He noted that the Black group contained many different types of people, including jocks, smart kids, and thugs. Conversely, a Black freshman male identified athletes, preppies, trouble kids, and freaks--noting that athletes and trouble kids are primarily Black, while preps and freaks are White. Not only were these students more aware of differentiation within their own racial community, but they collapsed the other race's categories into a smaller number. These examples reveal a definite social distance between Black and White status structures.

The social distance and lack of competition of racial pluralism are well-illustrated by examining the fundamental contrast for Black and White status groups in expressions of

association with physical space. We were presented with the contrast between walking and territoriality. Essentially, walking is individuals or groups systematically circulating among more stationary groups of individuals. Territoriality is the claiming of space as a group's own, including the ability to enforce this spatial differentiation. Both spatial expressions are a strategy to control visibility. Visibility within a social context has been an important aspect in the literature on high school status (Coleman 1963, 296; Canaan 1987, 392).

We found that walking was more common among high status Black males and lower status Black and White females. A typical lunch period might consist of a quick meal (if they ate at all) followed by thirty or forty minutes of walking from group to group visiting, gossiping, and flirting. This visibility strategy is logical for high status males because it enables them to maximize their visibility among many groups and individuals who are all part of a contiguous social network. Since they are high status and recognized by many people moving about helps to maximize their visibility and contacts. This would be much less the case for those of low status--unless they are trying to attract the attention of the high status males who are circulating--which in large part is precisely what a substantial number of low status females are trying to do. Since they are not likely to be visited by such males, they maximize their association by also circulating. One researcher who observed the high status Black cliques spent most of his days with them on a continuous tour of the lunchrooms and courtyards. These high status Black males even brought walkie-talkies to school on two occasions. The devices were used to keep in contact with other members of their clique as they wandered among the courtyards and lunchrooms. Here we see a somewhat humorous example of the premium on visibility and mobility for these Black athletes. Presumably, whatever news might be uncovered was so important that technology was utilized to enhance information flow.

While understanding the contiguous nature of the Black, non-salient, ranked status structure explains the importance of walking to visibility, the use of territoriality by White groups to maximize visibility is a result of salient, relatively unranked groups. The various White status groups, rather than focusing on competition between themselves, focus on defining boundaries and membership. Because of the de-emphasis of rank and the

prominence of salience, marking territory as prep or skater emphasizes their salience in relation to each other. For example, in one courtyard freshmen preps and alternatives always occupied one corner. Their loyalty to this space included sitting on backpacks or notebooks when the ground was cold or wet. On particularly cold days the group would huddle shoulder to shoulder to conserve warmth. Another example includes a different group of sophomore preps who discussed painting their table to make it more pertinent to them.

We noted above that low status white females, usually labeled by others as "rednecks," do circulate. There has been a history of hostility and fights between rednecks and some blacks. Hence, the exception seems to proves the rule: the white group that uses the same mechanism to compete for status are hostile to blacks--though we do not suggest this is the only source of the hostility. In the contrast between Black students staying mobile and White students staying put, the effects of racial pluralism are evident: two mechanisms for expressing status operate simultaneously without competing for resources or incorporating each other.

Life-style Pluralism

Race is a powerful variable for explaining the pluralism at WWHS, but it is not enough to explain the variation in ranking and salience within Black and White status structures. Both the white and black communities have significant subcategories of students. Within the white community there are numerous subcategories. As we have already indicated what is striking about these differences is that there is no agreement about how they are ranked. As we shall see later there is more ranking of the subcategories within the black community, but even here the usual pyramidal model of high school groups is attenuated. Now let us turn to the types of pluralism that exist within each of the race based communities.

Subgroups from the perspective of whites: The first key characteristic of life-style pluralism is the existence of a multiplicity of salient groups. This is also a hallmark of traditional pyramidal structures, but in this school groups are not rank ordered. Nonetheless, there are distinct social categories and identifiable status groups match these social categories in varying degrees. Moreover, group boundaries are obviously salient and maintained by

both symbolic markers and restrictions on interaction. The consistent identification of multiple and salient groups illustrates this aspect of pluralism. The most common and pervasive categories mentioned were preps, skaters, alternatives, freaks or punks, nerds, rednecks, homies[3] or Blacks, and thugs or hoodlums. Actual language varied, and there was some blurring around the separation between skaters, alternatives, and punks. Rednecks were also complicated because there were redneck cliques as well as individuals identified as rednecks who were also considered homie wanna-bes or "wiggers" (a contraction of white niggers); these were individuals who spent most of their time with Black students, dressed in Black/hip-hop style clothes, and who listened to rap music. While we will address this complication later, we point out that these categories were salient and viable for most students and were quickly recognized by researchers. One junior girl, probably a prep, described the following groups:

> Rednecks are girls who wear tight jeans, lots of make-up, have frizzy hair and wear lots of gold jewelry. Blacks (and white people who try to be Black) wear baggy clothes, lots of gold, and new gym shoes practically every day. Preps wear khakis and polos and look nice. Athletes usually wear sweatpants and shorts and soccer sandals. Alternative group wears camouflage and baggy clothes. The skaters wear baggy pants and Adidas Gazelles.

A senior self-described punk male listed hippies, preppies, gangsters or ghetto boys, and rednecks. A freshmen male, who described himself as in-between several groups, listed Homies, preps, skaters, rednecks, and nerds. These responses are typical, and provide a framework for understanding how the saliency of groups was broadly perceived throughout the school.

In short, there were a variety of culturally available social categories, and while the terminology varied between individuals, there was a high level of agreement about what were the relevant categories. There was, however, no agreed upon ranking of these categories such as were found in Coleman's schools and most other previous studies of public high schools. Nor was there any fundamental dichotomous tension such as the

---

[3]A term that is obviously derived from "Homeboys," a usage which according to our students is associated with the 1980s.

jock-burnout dichotomy reported by Eckert. Most of the categories we have identified referred to differences among the white students. Because of the racial pluralism and segregation described above, white students were vaguely aware of differences within the black community, but were generally indifferent to them.

Black subgroups: There were, of course, also distinctions within the black community and it is to these that we now turn. Friendship groups sometimes assigned themselves the name of a common street or neighborhood, but these were rarely recognized by name outside of the group--though the significance of neighborhood ties was frequently acknowledged. More commonly, there were references to athletes, meaning football and basketball players and cheerleaders, and thugs or hardcore individuals. At WWHS, football, basketball, and cheerleading had a majority of Black participants. Popularity among Black students is derived from two sources: participation in these activities and deviance or rejection of the norms associated with the white middle and upper classes. These two opposing sources of popularity are similar to Eckert's dichotomy of the social categories of jock and burn-out. (Eckert 1989). For example, a female freshman said "the main group in school are the jocks. That's cheerleaders, basketball players, and football players." On the other hand, there were groups of blacks that were usually identified by both black and white students as hoodlums or thugs. Most of these were males. But there were also groups of black unwed mothers who also tended to have low status in the view of other blacks, especially the more middle-class black women. In short, there were two primary categories of black students: those who were trouble makers or losers and those who were not. Of the latter group it was clear that being a recognized athlete or cheerleader clearly increased status. Hence members of this group tended to be grouped with athletes and cheerleaders even if they did not actually participate in these activities. Perhaps ironically, the status structure for black students came much closer to the traditional hierarchical model of white schools than was the case for white students. Why this is the case is a matter we will take up shortly.

"Deviant" patterns: Eckert (1989), in her study of Detroit suburban schools, discussed how the saliency of social categories are due to distinct ideologies which can be variously adhered to. At WWHS, we encountered people who identified themselves or were

identified by others as being "in between" the commonly mentioned categories. Examples include a preppie jock, a black preppie, a preppie hippy, wanna-be homies or "wiggers." This point also helps account for the variability of language surrounding the identification of groups. For example, a frequent label was hippie. Hippies were described as either a kind of prep, as in "hippie prep," or as laid back, environmentally friendly, and experimental with drugs, all markers of what others called the alternative group.

This "deviance" also cut across racial differences. A small but significant number of student had strong ties across racial boundaries. Three types of students were especially noticeable in this regard. First, there were a significant number of what were sometimes referred to as black preppies. These were black students, often from professional families, who were academically oriented, and spent a significant amount of time with white students. There were at least three or four lunch tables like this. Second, athletes, especially football and basketball players, were especially likely to have cross race friendships and to even hangout with members of the other race. Third, as we have already reported, there were white students, both male and female, who took on black hip-hop styles and hung out with mainly black students. These cross racial links were clearly the exception, but they were not exposed to high levels of social prohibition--though as we shall see some expressed hostility toward such relationships.

Explaining the Pluralism

What is it that explains this shift from hierarchy to pluralism? We believe three factors explain most of this outcome. First, and most obvious, the racial pluralism of the community contributes to that found in the school setting. While this is usually seen as a relatively progressive community by most standards, most blacks still live in predominantly black neighborhoods and come from families whose incomes are significantly below the mean. Hence, within the city itself there are fairly distinctive black and white subcultures.

Second, we believe that the increasing size of high schools contributes to greater pluralism. According to Milner's (1994) theory of status relations, status is relatively inexpansible--if you give everyone As or make everyone cheerleaders the status value of these declines. As the size of a system increases, the amount of status to be distributed does

not increase proportionately. Stated in other terms, the size of the elite who have general visibility is likely to decrease as a proportion of the total population. This means that larger and larger numbers of ambitious and able participants are excluded from the elite--at least if there is only one kind of elite. Consequently, as size increases many are motivated to either create or support other dimensions and realms of status competition.

This leads to the third and closely related factor. Milner (1994) also argues that hierarchy is most pronounced where status is insulated from other forms of power and is relatively unidimensional. Conversely, pluralism is more likely when there are multiple dimensions of status. This particular school system has invested significant resources in band, orchestra, chorus, drama, and a wide array of "non-traditional" athletic activities such as soccer, field hockey, tennis, and lacrosse. Several of these programs are considered outstanding and hence increase the status of those who participate in them. Consequently, while football, basketball and cheerleading are still important activities for some, for many they are simply one of a possible array of activities.

This third factor also helps explains why pluralism is less developed within the black subculture than the white one. Activities such as orchestra, band, drama, lacrosse, field hockey, and tennis are still largely white middle and upper class activities. Consequently, the interest of black students still tends to focus on the more traditional activities of football, basketball and cheerleading. Hence, the status structure is less multidimensional and, accordingly, less pluralistic.

Explaining Mutual Respect and Social Peace

In addition to the pluralism we have noted, this school seems to have an unusually low level of interracial conflict for a public high school that has equal numbers of blacks and whites and is comprehensive, rather than selective such as a private school or a magnet school. We believe this is due to the school's demographic composition as well as the specifics of status pluralism. First, the almost even number of black and whites means that it is impossible for one group to intimidate the other by sheer force of numbers. There seems to be some implicit recognition by students that mutual coexistence is the only viable strategy.

Second, the pluralistic status system means that interpersonal competition and conflict are more diffuse. The fact that a black boy beats out a white boy for quarterback of the high school does not have the same significance as a symbol of group power, when football is one of many different activities rather than "the only thing that counts." Third, the "deviant" cross-race links that we have described above, are both a sign of and a contributing factor to mutual respect.

WWHS is certainly not unique. We currently have data on 191 high schools around the country and at least twenty of these seem to match the pluralistic model. We do not have sufficient data to be certain that the sources of pluralism described above operate in each of these settings, but neither do the data we have call these hypotheses into question. We strongly suspect that in American high schools the long-term trend is in the direction of more pluralistic status systems.

The Limits and Costs of Pluralism

The extent of the pluralism, equality, and social peace should not be overstated. While few would publicly acknowledge the superiority of other groups or publicly claim superiority for themselves, there is some implicit envy and conflict. For example, a group of freshman who hangout in Courtyard No.2 specifically define themselves as "non-preppies." The observer reports, "My group tried diligently to separate themselves [from] any connection [with preppies] whenever possible. When a prep would enter the courtyard , the kids in my group were quick to point out the appearance of an outsider, and when they were asked to what group they belonged, my group dismissed any link to the preps." When someone defines their identity as not X, then it seems obvious that X is seen to have an attribute that they care about. The way they "care about" it can take two ideal typical forms. One is a "sour grapes" model. The freshman described above come close to this model. They are in at least a few respects envious of the preps and resent being rejected by them. The other ideal-type model involves the complete rejection and reversal of values. The Freaks/Punks/Goths come close to this model. They so reject to upper-middle class, success oriented lifestyle associated with the preps than they adopt antithetical symbols such as wearing black and body piercing, act hostile and aggressive toward the preps, and

occasionally actually fight them. They also are the ones most likely to involved in fights with other groups.

The tension and conflict are not limited to rednecks or freaks. One student comments: "Preps often make fun of the nerds [and] the nerds resent them. Gangsters sometimes bully others, and the skaters and punks are often made fun of by other groups." Moreover, a minority of both black and white students express hostility to those who associate extensively with those of another race. An observer of a group of black girls reports:

> I saw one of the girls that used to sit at their table and I noticed that she was hanging with an all white group .... I asked LaVerne about it, and she said [the girl] had been telling all their business to [others], and suddenly started hanging with white girls. LaVerne claimed she was "trying to be white." She also called her a "traitor." This is the first time she's ever even mentioned white people at all, except for those few whites that hang out with blacks.[4]

Such hostility seems to be more common among blacks than whites, but it is also present in the latter. One researcher recorded a white girl saying: "'All the white kids are in Courtyard No. 1 , except for the hippies... and the whites who listen to rap music.' She rolled her eyes indicating she apparently didn't approve of the whites who like rap music."

In a pluralistic system, the significance of group membership seems to increase. As one observer reports: "Clearly, it seems obvious that to do well socially in this school it is important to speak your mind, but first, you must find individuals who will appreciate and respect what you have to say. Since the individuals in this school do not seem concerned with anyone outside their group of friends, if you do not find a clique with whom you feel comfortable, it might be easy for you to be overlooked and left out of social interaction." There are "loners" in most schools, but here the stigma and cost seem even greater than in more hierarchical systems.

These qualifications should not be overstated and do not negate the argument that the pluralistic structure of WWHS is significantly different from the traditional hierarchical model. WWHS is not an egalitarian paradise, but there are much higher levels of

---

See *Fordham and Ogbu 1986 and Fordham 1988 for a discussion of "acting white."

egalitarianism and mutual respect that is the case in many high schools and the society in general.

The Puzzle: Why Is Conflict Rare and Segregation Prevalent?

When most people seem to have genuine respect for others, and generally get along in a civil and peaceful manner, why is there so much racial segregation? The students tend to give two answers to this question. The most common answer is that "it is just natural" for similar people to "hang out" with one another. Of course, what this answer ignores is that only one type of similarity is being considered--skin color. Clearly there are some whites who are much more similar in most other respects to many of their black peers than to other whites and vice versa. Why is it not "natural" for these other similarities to produce association and solidarity? No simple notion of "natural" similarity can explain the pervasive segregation. The second answer a few more thoughtful students give is that it is segregation that produces peace. People who live in two separate worlds have little to do with one another and hence little to fight over. But this overstates the degree of segregation. These students must and do interact with each other in a number of ways on a day to day basis--in classes, on athletic teams, in student government--with little racial conflict or tension. In our judgement, segregation, per se, is an inadequate explanation for the low levels of conflict.

So what explains the apparent paradox of high levels of segregation and low levels of racial conflict? In part we believe that it is the difference between micro and macro social identities. At the micro level many of these students have known one another much of their lives; the micro history of their interpersonal interaction has not, for the most part, involved racist attitudes toward one another. But their macro history--the collective memory--of each group has not escaped this past. The move toward pluralism and equality may have equalized the legitimacy of different macro identities, but if anything they have accentuated the boundaries of such identities. Hence, the paradox is that students "have no problem with" concrete members of another race, but they have a problem being intimate with someone who does not share their own macro identity. For to participate in such intimacy publicly is defined as being disloyal to one's macro identity. Hence, the great paradox of pluralism is

that it both reduces and increases the social distance between people.[5]

Conclusion

We do not mean to leave the impression that this school is a utopian enclave of equality and peace. There is competition, occasional fighting, frequent disciplinary problems, and much concern about individual status. But this school is distinctly different from the pyramidal model of the "traditional" high school that appears in both the popular press and the earlier sociological literature. Status pluralism leaves its imprint. Living within status pluralism, both lifestyle and racial, is a particular experience for the students. We believe that additional analysis of such cases can increase both our sociological understanding and suggest ways in which we might create more effective and humane schools.

Bibliography

Canaan, Joyce. 1987. "A Comparative Analysis of American Suburban Middle Class, Middle School, and High School Cliques." *Interpretive Ethnography of Education.* George Spindler and Louise Spindler, editors. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 385-408.

Coleman, James S. 1963. *The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and its Impact on Education.* 4th printing. New York: The Free Press.

Dornbusch, Sanford A. 1989. "The Sociology of Adolescence." *The Annual Review of Sociology.* W. Richard Scott and Judith Blake, Editors. Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews. 233-259.

Eder, Donna; Catherine Colleen Evans; Stephen Parker. 1995. *School Talk: Gender and Adolescent Culture.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Eckert, Penelope. 1989. *Jocks and Burnouts: Social Categories and Identity in the High School.* New York: Teacher's College Press.

Foley, Douglas E. 1990. *Learning Capitalist Culture: Deep in the Heart of Tejas.*

---

[5]Schoefield's (1988) study of a magnet school emphasizes the importance of differences in academic achievement and the greater aggressiveness of blacks as sources of the segregation in the school she studied. We think that these factors undoubtedly play a role, but are not as important in our situation as the one she describes.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Fordham, Signithia. 1988. "Racelessness as a Factor in Black Students' School Success: Pragmatic Strategy or Pyrrhic Victory?" *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (February):54-84.

Fordham, Signithia and John U. Ogbu. 1986. "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the "Burden of 'Acting White'", *The Urban Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 176-206.

Giordano, Peggy C. 1995. "The Wider Circle of Friends in Adolescence." *American Journal of Sociology.* 101(3): 661-97.

Hollingshead, August B. 1975. *Elmstown's Youth and Elmstown Revisited.* New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Ianni, Francis A.J. 1989. *The Search for Structure: A Report on American Youth Today.* New York, NY: The Free Press.

Kinney, David A. 1993. "From Nerds to Normals: The Recovery of Identity among Adolescents from Middle School to High School." *Sociology of Education.* 66 (January):21-40.

Merten, Don E. 1997. "The Meaning of Meanness: Popularity, Competition, and Conflict among Junior High School Girls." *Sociology of Education.* 70 (July):175-191.

Milner, Murray Jr. 1994. *Status and Sacredness: A General Theory of Status Relations and an Analysis of Indian Culture.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Milner, Murray Jr. 1996. "Geeks, Weirdos and Cool Kids: Status Among American Adolescents." Presented at American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, 1996.

Schofield, Janet Ward. 1982. *Black and White in School: Trust, Tension, or Tolerance?* Praeger Studies in Ethnographic Perspectives on American Education, General Editor, Ray C. Rist. [New York:] Praeger Publishers, CBS Inc.